

State right to cancel moth spraying

By Sam Farr

Monterey (Calif.) County Herald

June 21, 2008

The infestation of the light brown apple moth has brought a level of rancor and fear of government to the Central Coast I have not seen in my 30 years of public service. But the decision by the California Department of Food and Agriculture this week to halt aerial pheromone application over populated areas was absolutely correct.

Putting an end to overflights is the first step toward refocusing our efforts on eradicating this invasive pest. Over the past several months it became clear to me that aerial application had become a lightning rod for opposition and was endangering the entire eradication program. Since this moth was first discovered last year, I've served an objective oversight role, bringing stakeholders together to ensure the process is safe and effective.

With that in mind, I met last month with Cindy Smith, administrator of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, to express concerns that aerial application was posing an insurmountable barrier to the eradication process. It was time to re-evaluate all the tools available in the eradication process.

That re-evaluation culminated in another meeting in Washington on Wednesday with Smith and CDFA Secretary A.G. Kawamura. At that meeting, I made it clear that spraying must not be allowed to cast doubt on other, more acceptable eradication tools.

Let me be clear: Getting rid of this moth in a safe way is still the goal of CDFA and USDA, and it's in the best interest of everyone on the Central Coast. The light brown apple moth is an invasive species with the potential for widespread damage.

An array of experts agrees that the window of opportunity to eradicate this moth is still open, and it's an opportunity we must not miss. We have seen successful eradication efforts in the past. Both the Asian longhorned beetle and the boll weevil gained a toehold in the United

States, but were eradicated.

But we have also seen what happens when efforts fail. Officials were unable to get rid of the imported fire ant. States continue to see negative effects on commerce, recreation and agriculture, and the ant poses a health threat in many communities. LBAM has the same risk potential.

But the reasons this moth must be eradicated have become jumbled. Yes, our agriculture industry is one of the reasons. But the idea that only “rich farmers” are being affected is a fallacy that has been used to sway public opinion. Not only does this moth have the potential to bankrupt many small farms and nurseries, it has the ability to devastate large swaths of our environment.

Just one example is our beloved Monterey pine trees, which are particularly susceptible to this pest. Consider what will happen when large numbers of hungry moths move into our forest canopies with little or no check on their progress. To argue that only big ag would be affected is plain wrong. If you have a backyard, you will be affected. If you enjoy the scenery the Central Coast offers (and the tourism dollars it brings), you will be affected. If you prefer the fresh fruits and vegetables we grow, you will be affected. There are immediate and personal effects to every one of us.

But none of those arguments justifies using a tool that the public cannot tolerate. Reliance on aerial pheromone application as the primary tool put the entire eradication process at risk of failure. It was drawing protests against accepted methods of eradication just as a mechanism to stop spraying. And that was a risk we could not take.

The meetings I convened between federal and state officials were aimed at reviewing all the tools at our disposal and re-evaluating the entire eradication framework. We have an array of options to eradicate this moth. Pheromones will still be used from the ground in targeted applications. Stingerless wasps are being bred as a predator to the moth. And the sterile-moth program announced by Secretary Kawamura this week will be available years earlier than expected.

As long as we have other viable options available to eradicate the moth, we must not allow any

one tool to put the entire process in jeopardy. I look forward to continuing my work with state and federal officials to ensure that the public is fully aware of what is happening and to provide a safe and effective eradication process. My job in Washington is to give the Central Coast a voice in Congress. This week, that voice was heard.